

Barbara Kay: Kids today need to get a sense of humour

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Back in the day, comedians used to love performing on college campuses. Their audiences were young, hip and appreciative of edgy humour.

Nowadays, not so much.

In fact, alpha comedians Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock and Larry the Cable Guy have — separately — essentially agreed that political correctness has so diminished their experience performing on campuses, that they are voting themselves off that judgmental and increasingly boring island. The life blood of comedy is mockery and in academia, the “you can’t say that” list is proliferating like zebra mussels on the hull of the good ship Humour.

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Back in 2006, Chris Rock mused about playing college campuses, saying, “This is not as much fun as it used to be,” and noting that George Carlin had expressed the same thought before he died. Rock attributed it to “kids raised on a culture of ‘we’re not going to keep score in the game because we don’t want anybody to lose’.” Larry the Cable Guy has similar reservations.

But it was Jerry Seinfeld who turned a national spotlight on the issue, when he told Colin Cowherd of ESPN earlier this month: “I don’t play colleges, but I hear a lot of people tell me, ‘Don’t go near colleges. They’re so PC.’ (Young people) just want to use these words: ‘that’s racist,’ ‘that’s sexist,’ ‘that’s prejudice.’ They don’t know what the hell they’re talking about.”

This in turn prompted an open letter to Jerry Seinfeld published in the Huffington Post by San Diego State University student Anthony Berteaux, who lectured Jerry Seinfeld — Jerry Seinfeld! — on what is and is not “funny.”

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If Berteaux had a sense of humour, he would have realized his arrogance was in itself hilarious. Bill Maher was quick off the mark exploiting this comedy gold on his show, *Real Time*, with a riposte (channelling George Carlin): “Dear you little sh-t, I’m sure you’re busy with your new letter explaining astrophysics to Stephen Hawking and giving jump shot pointers to Steph Curry, but try to get a clue.”

The absence of a sense of humour regarding one’s sacred cows is a sure sign of illiberalism, and in this era of extreme and pervasive campus illiberalism, one needn’t be a professional comedian, or even a brazenly incorrect conservative like Ann Coulter (is she a polemicist or a stand-up comedian?) to incur the wrath of ideologues.

An audience’s silence in response to a good joke is a cruel chastisement for a comedian. But some academics who dare to joke about “incorrect” subjects would, in the retrospective light of their own formidable punishment, be thrilled with mere silence.

In 2011, for example, Dr. Lazar Greenfield, emeritus professor of surgery at the University of Michigan's School of Medicine, referred in a presentation to research from the journal Archives of Sexual Behavior, which had found that semen had mood-enhancing effects on women.

(--image--)

In a joking aside, which I found to be pretty damn funny for an amateur, he remarked that, “now we know there's a better gift for (Valentine's Day) than chocolates.” Uh oh. Radical feminists exploded in fulminant rage, presumably at the idea that men are endowed by nature with any “gift” at all to offer women, and went for his jugular.

In spite of his abject apologies, the bewildered 76-year-old gentleman was obliged to step down as editor of Surgery News and even forced to withdraw from his approaching tenure as president of the American College of Surgeons. More shockingly, the entire February issue of Surgery News was removed from circulation to suppress knowledge of the semen research. As pundit Jonah Goldberg observed in the case of a similar feminist mobbing of another distinguished but hapless scientist, it was “very North Korea.”

Irony is viewed as a subversive element by totalitarian regimes (because, well, it is subversive), so among oppressed populations, mocking humour goes underground as a cherished symbol of intellectual dissent — explaining the disproportionate number of Jews in comedy — but withers among the literalist flock serving unitary ideologies like communism or doctrinaire Islam. Or feminism, as Dr. Greenfield learned to his chagrin and professional humiliation.

Unlike most other entertainers, professional comedians need to workshop their material in front of live audiences, in order to smooth out their material's rough edges. They need latitude for missteps — they need to be able to cross lines. When they are punished, not for missteps but for actually being funny, they know it's time to cut bait.

Comedians are lucky. They can walk away from campuses. Pity the academics with a sense of humour who have no choice and must remain in their Ivory-Tower gulags.

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